

Seminar 27, 'Reconsidering Stage Properties'

Abstract List

Bridget Anderson (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

“Take this, and this, Ay, this, and that”:

A Proliferation of Props in *The Spanish Tragedy*”

This paper explores the extensive use of stage properties in Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*. The footnotes and text call for a liberal number of weapons, books, purses, and (bloody) napkins, among other props. The primary revenger, Hieronimo, interacts with more properties than any other character by far. At times, his arms are so full of poniards, ropes, and sheaves of paper that his action may elicit some laughs. This project explores how a superabundance, even an excess, of props and tools undermines Hieronimo’s mission and casts him as a comedic figure.

The theme of excess and waste is also applied to paper, a frequently used prop in *TST*. In Act III Scene 14, the sorrowful Hieronimo tears up a sheaf of legal papers. This passionate destruction represents the harm Hieronimo wishes to do his enemies, but the scene also reads as wasteful. The paper used for each production must be replaced before the following performance, since the ripped and damaged paper is not reusable. The impulsive waste which is characterized as destructive symbolizes the excess of passion expressed by the characters of the play.

The audience’s attention is drawn to the nature and function of props through the metatheatricality of Hieronimo’s masque in Act IV. By devoting an scene in Act III to the assignment and distribution of props among the masquers, and then revealing in Act IV that the “props” are in fact real weapons and that the play-within-a-play itself is a massacre, not a play, Kyd questions the weakness and artificiality of props and suggests that they are powerful agents that enable their users to completely perform their action.

This paper engages with paratextual studies, dramaturgy, and performance analysis in its meditation on the use of properties in *The Spanish Tragedy*.

“‘Enter Steward in a Cloake, muffled’: Muffling on the Shakespearean Stage”

This paper studies an early modern theatrical practice that blurs the boundary between stage property and stage direction. It’s the practice of *muffling* -- “appear[ing] with one’s face concealed by a garment” (Dessen and Thompson, 146) -- a distinct action that requires a standard article of clothing (a cloak or, in the case of *The Winter’s Tale*, a hat). Related but distinct from disguising and masking, muffling invites both the meta- and inter- theatrical complications associated with those kinds of performances and their props. This paper explores such complications, drawing on roughly 35 instances of stage muffling from 1578 to 1623. I demonstrate how the convention becomes a “go-to” ploy in city comedies, where it functions as a kind of inverse to the class-inflected sartorial display Amanda Bailey has described as “flaunting,” before I examine Shakespeare’s use of it in three plays: first in *Measure for Measure*, in which it enables the final twist of the trial scene; then in *Timon of Athens*, in which it contributes to the play’s bitter satire; and finally in *Coriolanus*, in which Shakespeare has taken the language of the prop/direction (“*Enter Coriolanus in mean apparel, disguised and muffled*”) straight from his source in North’s translation of Plutarch (“For ill fauoredly muffled and disguised as he was”). I consider how these instances, both Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean, might be inflected by performance by boy or adult companies as well as how they reflect – by concealing -- notions about the face and mind on stage.

Titus's properties and the Unfixing of Likeness

In this paper, I explore how *Titus Andronicus's* amputations and prosthetic properties negotiate models of the affinity between disability and theatricality. After outlining frameworks for the attachment of theatricality to disability, particularly in relation to prosthetic properties, I question and shape the status of *Titus* as a disability play. The parade of theatrical prostheses across Lavinia's and Titus's linked experiences of mutilation suggests a new pattern for disability-theatricality collaboration, one in which the slippage among forms of likeness (metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy) indexes an unfixity-within-likeness common to prosthetic disability experience and theatrical properties. *Titus* helps me develop an account of body parts as properties that, acknowledging both the materiality and ontology of stage properties and their participation in the dynamic of disability-as-trope, is most interested in how the structures of troubled prosthetic likeness *within* each discourse (theatricality, disability) also organize the troubled likeness *between* them. For the purposes of our seminar, I hope to suggest how some theoretical insights from disability studies, in particular about the relationship between disabled persons and prostheses, might propose modes of parsing ontological differences among stage properties.

Bernice Mittertreiner Neal (York University)

“About this gear”: Props in *Platea* and *Locus* in *Dido, Queen of Carthage*

This paper argues that stage properties on early modern English stages can shift in and out of *platea* and *locus* modes as actors do. Using Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Nashe's play as a case study, I show how props in the *platea* attract attention that undermines the authority of this play's most powerful characters. In the *locus*, props conform to their fictional identity and do what they have been scripted to do, but props in the *platea* point to their own ontologies. In *locus* mode, they evoke the luxuriousness of *Dido's* love-tokens and point to the power of those that bestow them. Props in the *platea* undermine the rhetoric of the queen's most powerful lines, the very lines that authored her spectacular gifts for Aeneas and called them forth to the

stage. In performance, the things scripted by Dido to impede Aeneas from his departure impede only Dido. I argue that however stage objects catch a spectator's attention, and appear metatheatrically as stage properties, they are in the *platea*. Shorn in the moment of their fictional roles assigned them, objects speak about themselves, or not at all. Shifting in and out of *platea* and *locus* modes, props can reflect, even effect, power relations in performance.

David Nicol (Dalhousie University)

Arguing with Props: The Aquila in the Roman Britain Plays

In the Roman Britain plays of the Jacobean era, playwright responded to one another's unconventional uses of a specific prop: the *aquila*, or Roman eagle standard. Tracing the onstage eagles in this tightly connected group of plays shows their authors rethinking and reworking this simple prop for different contexts. By placing them in their proper chronological order (thanks to recent work on dating the plays), we see the aquilae marking a changing representation of Rome during a time of mounting crisis. The peaceable vision of *Cymbeline* is responded to with a more aggressively patriotic one in *The Valiant Welshman*, in which an aquila is violently disparaged; *A Shoemaker a Gentleman* then reads as an updating of the peace in *Cymbeline* for more extreme times during the Bohemian Crisis, one that asks its audience to take a much bigger leap when applauding Britons who unite with Rome, encapsulated in the image of a Briton warrior fighting with an aquila in one hand as he destroys Rome's enemies. And the apocalyptic ending of *The Virgin Martyr* (not literally a Roman Britain plays but one that alludes frequently to the subgenre), looks like a riposte to the optimism of *Shoemaker*, a militant rejection of Rowley's attempt at wringing a warm and friendly peace out of the barbarities of Rome, and to this end using aquilae only to signify persecution. The echoing effects of the aquilae in these plays are among the evidence that their authors were aware of one another's work and were directly responding to it. Tracing their responses and counter-responses shows how props could be visually striking interventions in such theatrical debates. Emily Parise, *The Body as Stage Property and Excessive Visibility in Coriolanus and Richard III*

This paper investigates how a body becomes a stage property. While actors are necessarily in a place of visibility on the stage, some characters' bodies capture audience attention more than other, as the text signals to some kind of bodily difference: gender, disability, injury, or death. Some bodies are *excessively visible*, and the plays themselves do not allow audiences to politely turn away from apparent bodily difference. In the moments when Shakespeare places direct emphasis on the body, calling audience attention to the character/actor's physical form, the body becomes a stage property. The actor is no longer passively observed, but intensely and deliberately scrutinized. Their body is now an active and central part of the dramaturgy of the play.

In this essay, I consider two of Shakespeare's most notorious bodies: Coriolanus and Richard III. Both titular men are put on display in their respective plays (in the case of Coriolanus, he is literally asked to display himself for the public). Both plays constantly draw audience attention the body and its role in the dramatic action; in *Coriolanus*, the emphasis is on the concealed nature of his body, whereas in *Richard III* the attention is on the almost unignorable fact of Richard's disability. This paper proposes new ways of understanding the body in a dramatic work, and how expanding our understanding of stage properties allows for new or more nuanced dramaturgical analyses of Shakespeare's play.

Tanya Pollard (Brooklyn College and Graduate Center, CUNY)

Staging the Remains of the Dead

In both classical antiquity and the early modern world, playwrights peopled their stages with the undead, reviving figures from mythic pasts as well as reversing fatalities within their own plays. In remembering or resurrecting these lost characters, actors turned to morbid remnants including urns and skulls to engage in a version of necromancy, the dark art of making magic from the dead. As early modern English writers began invoking the legacy of classical theaters to bolster their own theatrical experiments, they began turning to classical anecdotes about actors to reimagine this task. Reflecting on the ambivalent relationship between the dead and the living, and between real and feigned passions, these stories at times drew on the actual material remains of the dead to imagine these unsettling acts of reanimation.

Properties of Death On and Under the Stage

This paper surveys the stage props related to death and the underworld identified at a broad range of institutions and over a broad time period. It begins in the universities of Cambridge and Oxford where students and masters staged plays in both Christian and classical traditions particularly Senecan at Cambridge in the period 1551-1561, (*Troas* 1551-1552, and again 1560-1561 and *Medea* 1561). Focussing on stage properties that specifically relate to death and the underworld, it works forward from here to the countless Furies who regularly haunt the stages of the Inns of Court in such plays as Sackville and Norton's *Gorboduc* (1561), Gascoigne and Kenwilmersche's *Jocasta* (1566), and Thomas Hughes's *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1587) where they are also accompanied by several ghosts who return from the underworld. In these plays, returns to the world of the living are often accompanied by props and/or devices that seem to signify enigmatically about the traffic between the underworld and the upperworld, and about the sins of the figures who remain for now in the world of the living. This paper proposes a reinvestigation of the properties of the stage that relate to death and the afterlife surveying a large body of works from the period working forward from these early tragedies staged in educational settings to the public stages of Shakespeare and Marlowe.

Maria Teresa Prendergast (The College of Wooster)

Laurels, Canopies, and Thrones : Stage Properties and Queenly Apotheosis in Fletcher and Shakespeare's *King Henry VIII*

My paper seeks to answer the question of why Act Four of Shakespeare and Fletcher's *King Henry VIII*—the act which presents the apotheoses of Henry's queens Katherine and Anne—contains by far the most props in the play. I suggest that the playwrights used props to avoid the potential censorship that could result from representing sympathetically these two historical figures—one whose marriage had been annulled by Henry and one who had been executed for treason by him, seventy-five years before this play was written during the reign of Henry's grandnephew. Stage properties, I suggest, act as “social agents” (to use Alfred Gell's term) that embody how Anne's coronation procession transforms her from being an active, articulate

young woman into a mute object whose identity is subsumed by the power of her husband, a power made visible by these worldly props—from the canopy above her head, to her hair “richly adorned with pearl,” to the “rich chair of state” that holds her as she sits (4.1.8-10, 67). In contrast, props in Catherine’s dream vision—including the “white robes” of angelic figures who appear with “garlands of bays, and golden vizzards on their faces” (4.2. s.d.)—act as self-consuming artifacts that make visible Katherine’s spiritual coronation and inspire her to speak before they disappear from stage, thus making literal space for Catherine’s liberation from the oppressions of material life on earth.

Simon Smith (Shakespeare Institute)

Musical Instruments as Stage Properties in the Early Modern Theatre

It is no coincidence that the sole extant pre-1642 visual representation of the inside of an English commercial theatre, van Buchel’s copy of de Witt’s sketch of the Swan Theatre, offers a visually privileged musician with a trumpet, not just benefitting acoustically from his place on the roof but offered prominently to the sight by this location. My paper will explore the ways in which music was a recognised category of *visual* performance and stagecraft in pre-1642 commercial drama, with instruments, performers, and performances all explicitly offered to the sight of playgoers in ways not fully recognised in the scholarship to date. Building on recent interest in early modern music as a multi-sensory experience, as well as increasing recognition amongst theatre historians of the importance of visual stagecraft and engaged, active spectatorship to the dramaturgy of early modern plays, it will consider the numerous moments in extant plays of the period where musical instruments appear to operate significantly, primarily, or even exclusively as visual rather than aural signifiers. Taking lute-props in *The Taming of a Shrew* (printed 1594) and Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (WM, 1603) as its examples, the chapter will demonstrate how spectators’ active engagement with musical instruments as material properties could yield suggestions, significations and associations that had profound consequences for their understanding of these plays, and in particular for their understandings of the musician characters whose visual-musical performances shaped the dramaturgy of the commercial stage in early modern England.

Experimental Properties, Experimental Flesh: The Stage Property as
Anatomical Instrument in John Ford's *Tis Pity She's a Whore*

After Giovanni murders the sister he impregnated, Ford leaves us with the chilling stage direction, "Exit with the body." Offstage, Giovanni excises Annabella's heart and carries it on his dagger, preparing to "act [his] last and greater part" of the public-facing anatomist. Holding this unnamed heart above a banquet table full of "dainty fare," he asks the preposterous yet epistemologically provocative question: "Look well upon't. D'ee know't?" Absurdly asking guests at the banquet if they "know't" well enough to recognize it as Annabella's heart, Giovanni presumes that knowledge about a particular woman's interior can pre-exist the moment of incision—that Annabella's physical heart can be identified by those who know her intimately.

Ford uses this moment to pry audiences out of ordinary habits of viewing, asking them to visually inspect Annabella's heart in a way that elicits questions about what it means to *know* human flesh. Holding the chunk of flesh over a myriad of "coarse confections," Giovanni asks, "D'ee know't?"—"*can you distinguish it from other meats?*" For playgoers, to "know" this meat as Annabella's flesh requires that they view it through the lens of fictional performance, suspending disbelief so that a stage property (likely a lamb or pig's heart) can assume the posture of a human heart. In the world of the play, the meat on Giovanni's dagger truly *is* Annabella's heart—it needs no imaginative transformation—yet Ford orients the banquet-goers to the same optic position as his playhouse audiences, who depend on theatrical habits of viewing to "know" fictive stage properties as human flesh. When Giovanni's audience first sees the flesh, it lacks subjectivity: a human heart at a feast might resemble any other piece of uncooked meat from the kitchen. Estranging the organ from Annabella's body makes it impossible for viewers to ascertain its identity, but when Giovanni subsequently names the heart, he replicates the theatrical practice of grafting subjectivity onto objects used in dramatic performance, unintentionally drawing a parallel between stage properties and human appendages. Ford experiments with this stage property to postulate that human flesh can only be 'known' through performance: the same performative gestures actors would use to present props as human flesh are also requisite for Giovanni's onlookers to recognize the meat on his dagger as Annabella's heart.